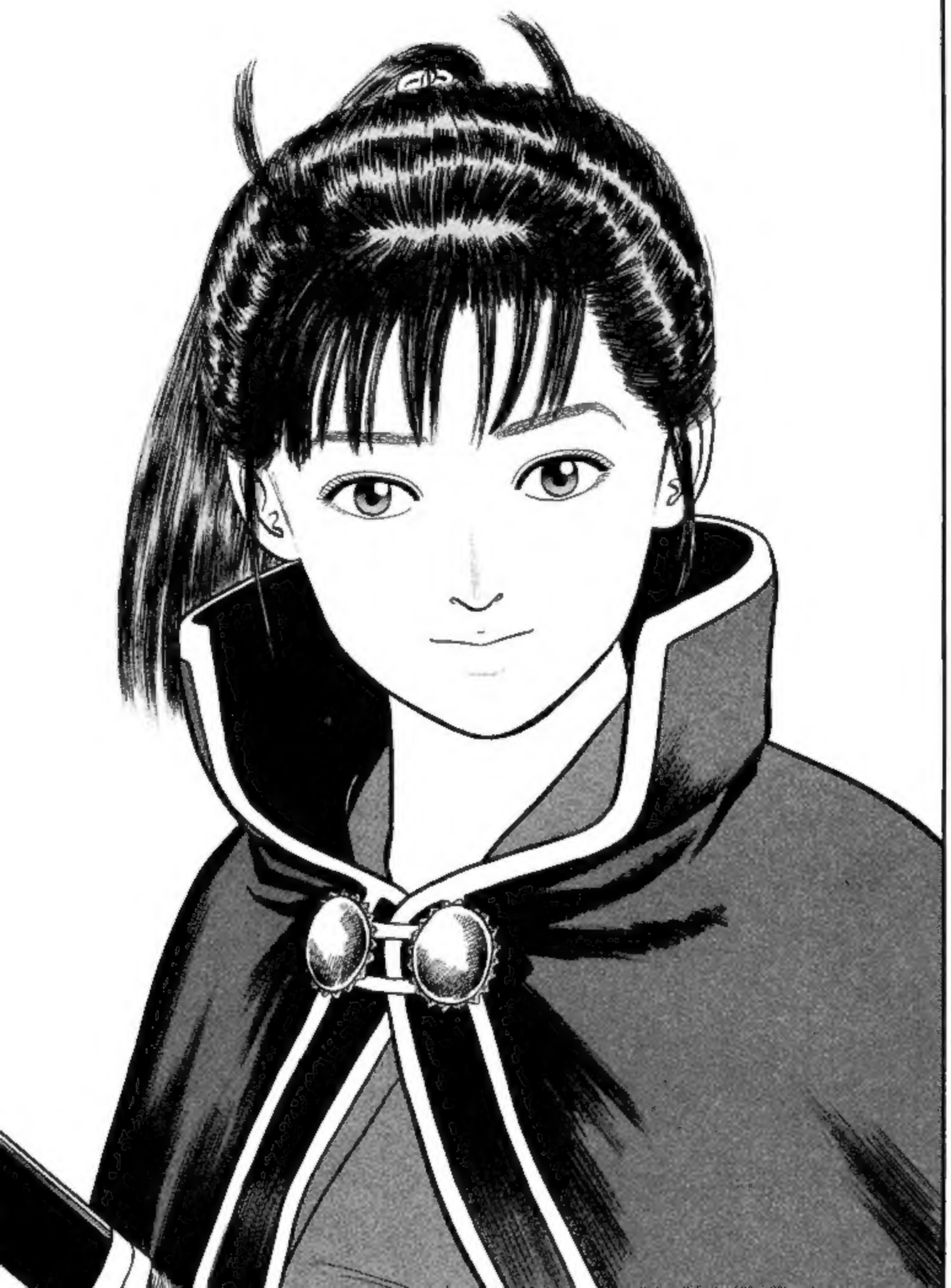
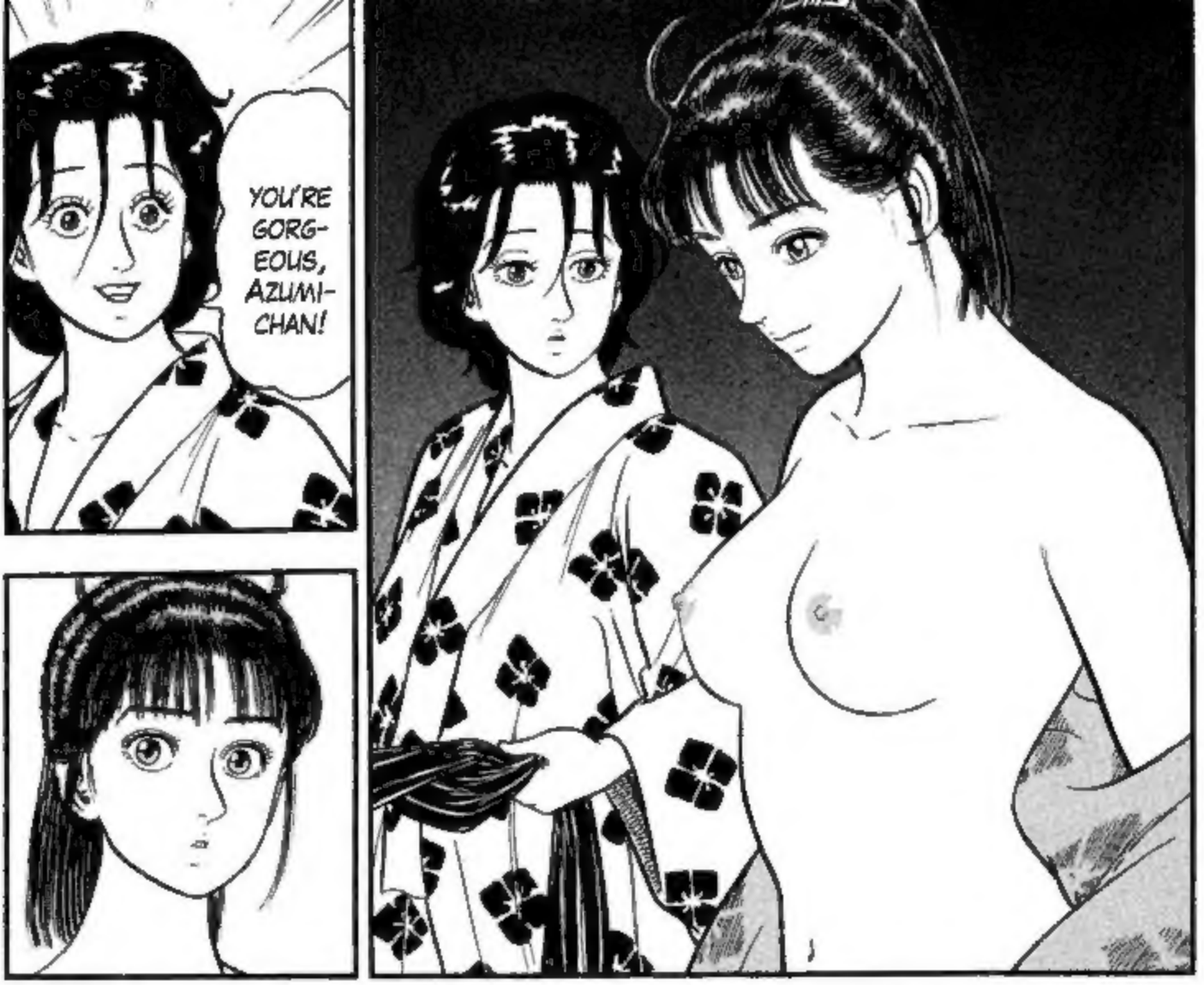
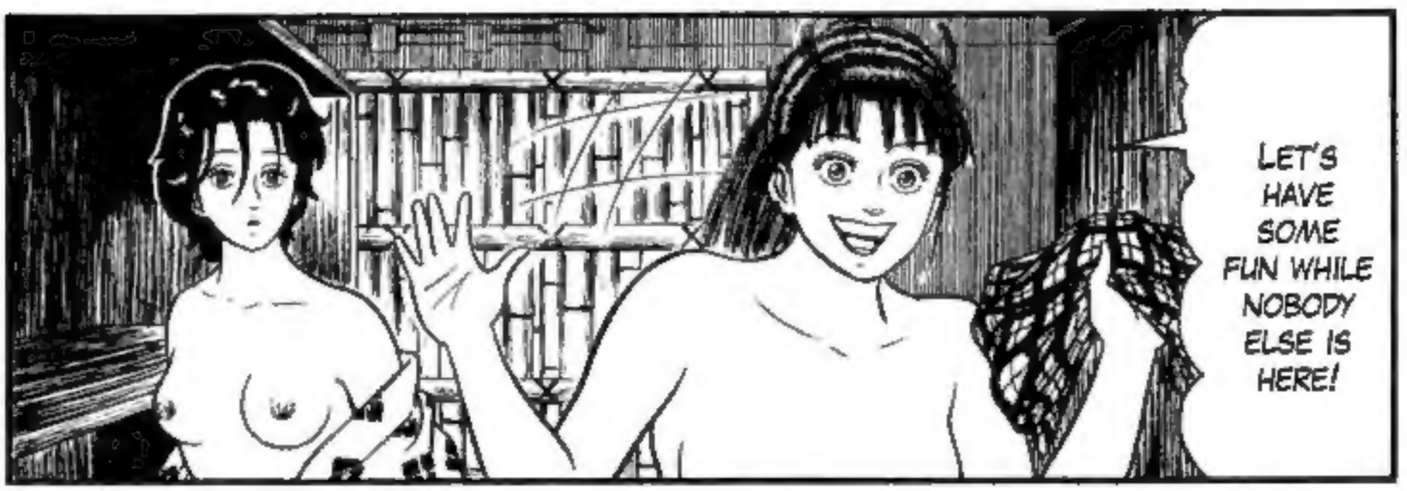
CHAPTER 4: DEEPENED BONDS




YOU'RE GORG-EOUS, AZUMI-CHAN!

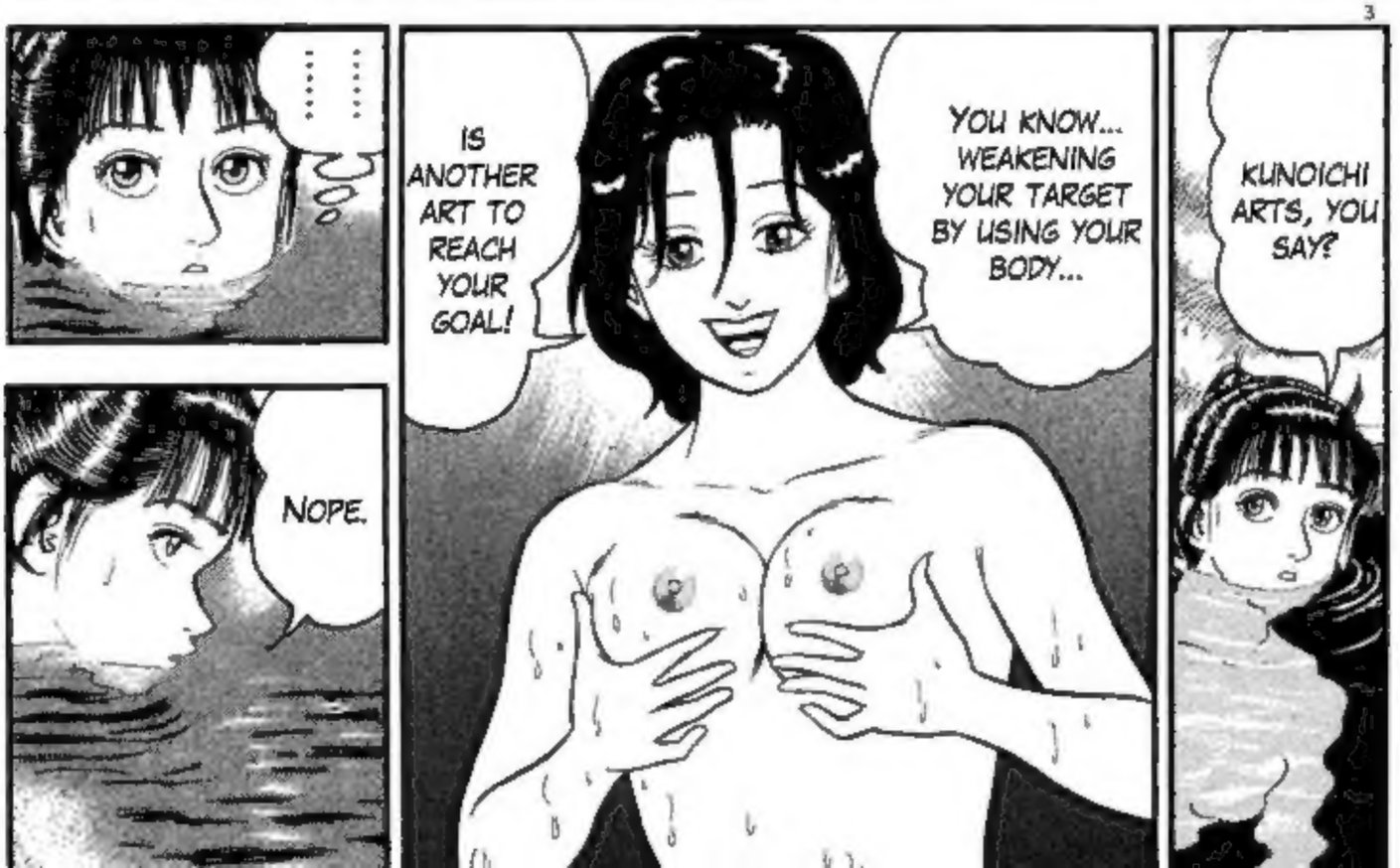

LET'S HAVE SOME FUN WHILE NOBODY ELSE IS HERE!

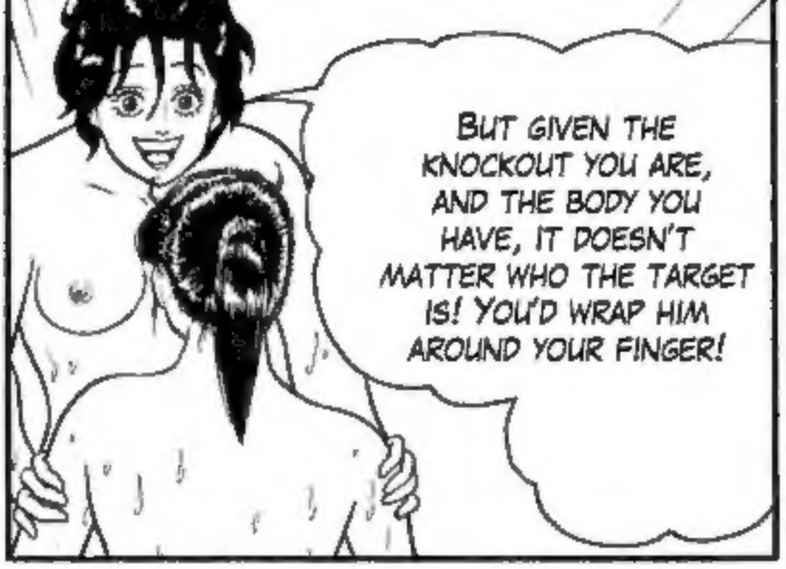
2

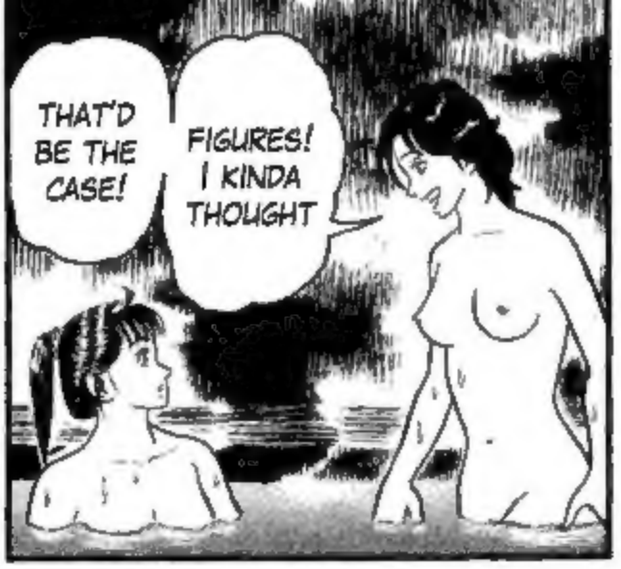
.....

YOU'RE BEAUTIFUL! I'M SURP-ISED!
SINCE YOU'RE A MASTER FENCER THAT NO MEN CAN'T MATCH, I THOUGHT YOU'D HAVE A MORE MAS-CULINE BODY, BUT IT'S NOT TRUE...
.....

GIVEN HOW STRONG YOU ARE... TO THIS POINT, HAVE YOU EVER USED ANY...KUNOICHI ARTS TO SLAY AN ENEMY?
AZUMI-CHAN...
.....

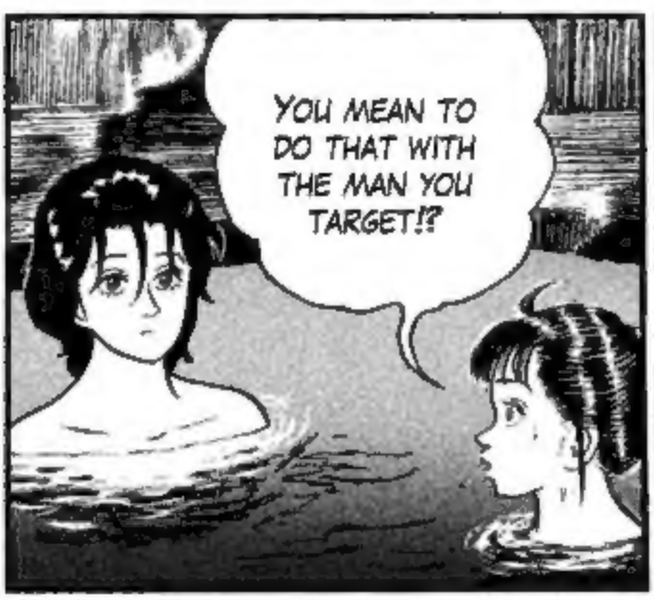

.....
NOPE.
IS ANOTHER ART TO REACH YOUR GOAL!
YOU KNOW... WEAKENING YOUR TARGET BY USING YOUR BODY...
KUNOICHI ARTS, YOU SAY?


BUT GIVEN THE KNOCKOUT YOU ARE, AND THE BODY YOU HAVE, IT DOESN'T MATTER WHO THE TARGET IS! YOU'D WRAP HIM AROUND YOUR FINGER!


THAT'D BE THE CASE!
FIGURES! I KINDA THOUGHT

YOU MEAN
THOSE...KUNOICHI ARTS YOU SPEAK OF, HATSUNE-SAN...

.....


YOU MEAN TO DO THAT WITH THE MAN YOU TARGET!?

AND EMBRA-CING..
WHEN THEY'RE NAKED...

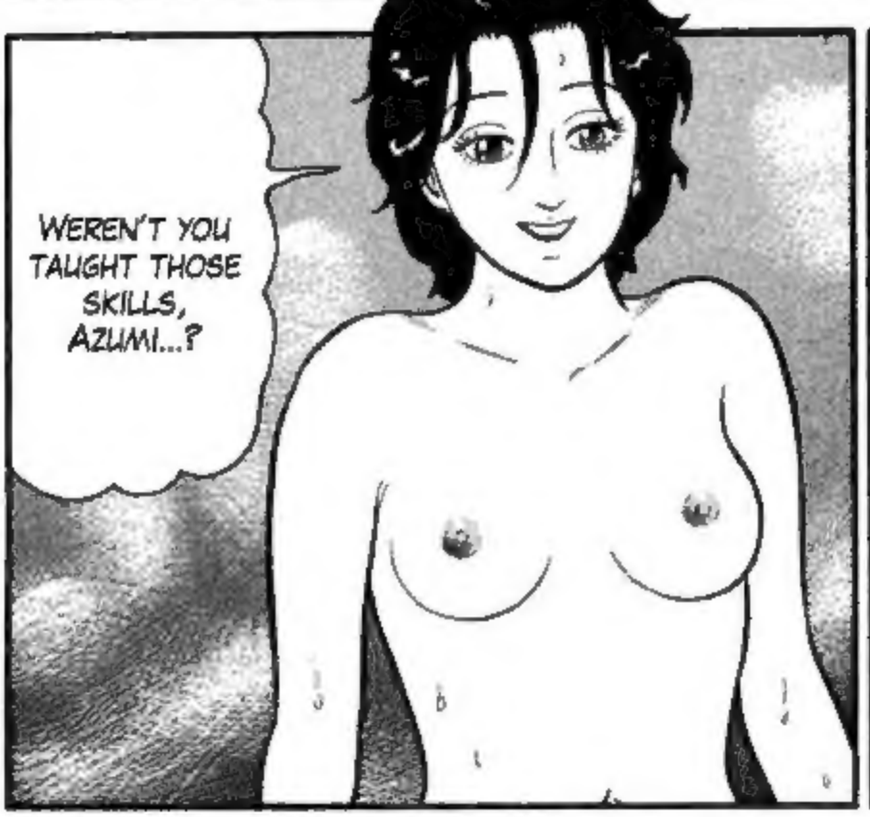
THOSE THINGS... THAT HAPPEN BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN...

AND KILL HIM DURING!?

.....

YOU GOT IT.

THAT'S WHAT I WAS TAUGHT.
MEN RELAX THEIR GUARD IN THE ARMS OF WOMEN.
IN SOME CASES YES, BUT IF THERE'RE INFORMATION I WANT, I GET IT FROM THEM.


WEREN'T YOU TAUGHT THOSE SKILLS, AZUMI...?

AND SHE DOES THAT EVEN...EVEN IF IT'S A TARGET SHE DOESN'T WANT TO DO IT WITH!?
I CAN'T ASK HER THAT!

.....
ONLY...SWORD TECHNIQUES?

I...
WAS ONLY TAUGHT TECHNIQUES TO SURVIVE USING THE SWORD...

ISN'T THAT COOL THEN, AZUMI!?!
WELL ...

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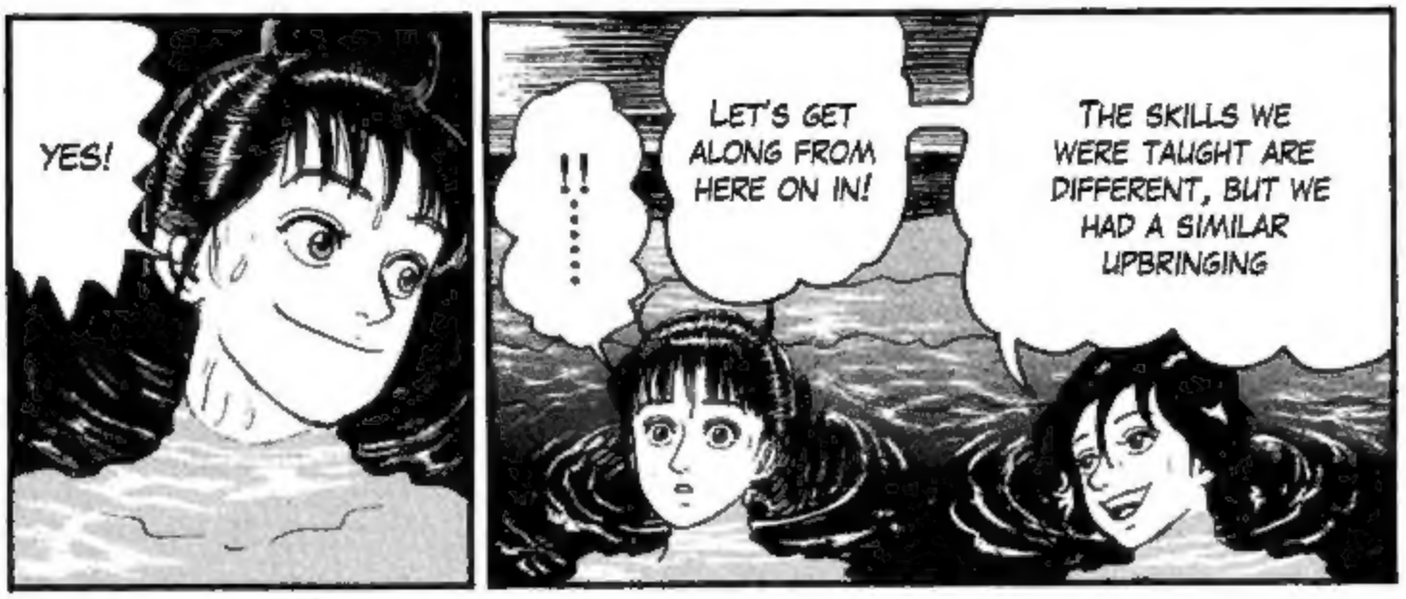
EH!? THEN YOU DON'T KNOW YOUR PARENTS TOO, HATSUNE-SAN!?

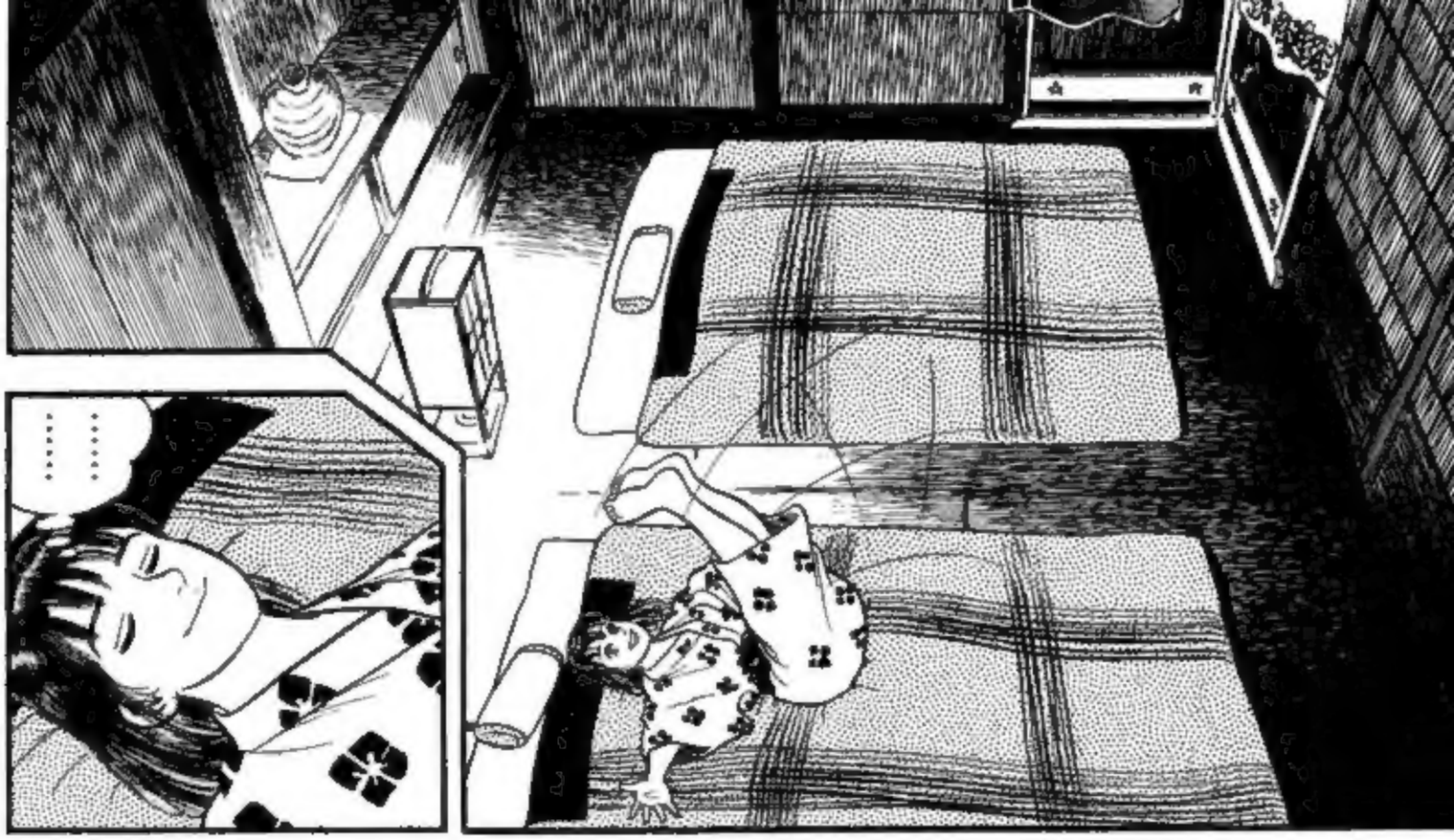
THE BOSS WON'T EVER TELL ME.
I'VE REALLY GOT NO IDEA.
OR EVEN KIDNAPPED BY OUR BOSS?
WAS I ABANDONED? OR SOLD?
BUT I'VE MADE SO MANY FRIENDS IN MY NINJA VILLAGE!
YEP!
IT WAS THE SAME FOR YOU, RIGHT, AZUMI-CHAN? I'VE HEARD SOMETHING ABOUT IT.
WE'VE ALWAYS BEEN TOG-ETHER!
YEP!
DID KAGARI-DONO ALSO GROW UP WITH YOU IN THAT VILLAGE?
HE'S NOT NEARLY SO GOOD AT PLEASING A WOMAN!
HE'S THE BEST WITH A SWORD FROM OUR VILLAGE, BUT... Y'KNOW...

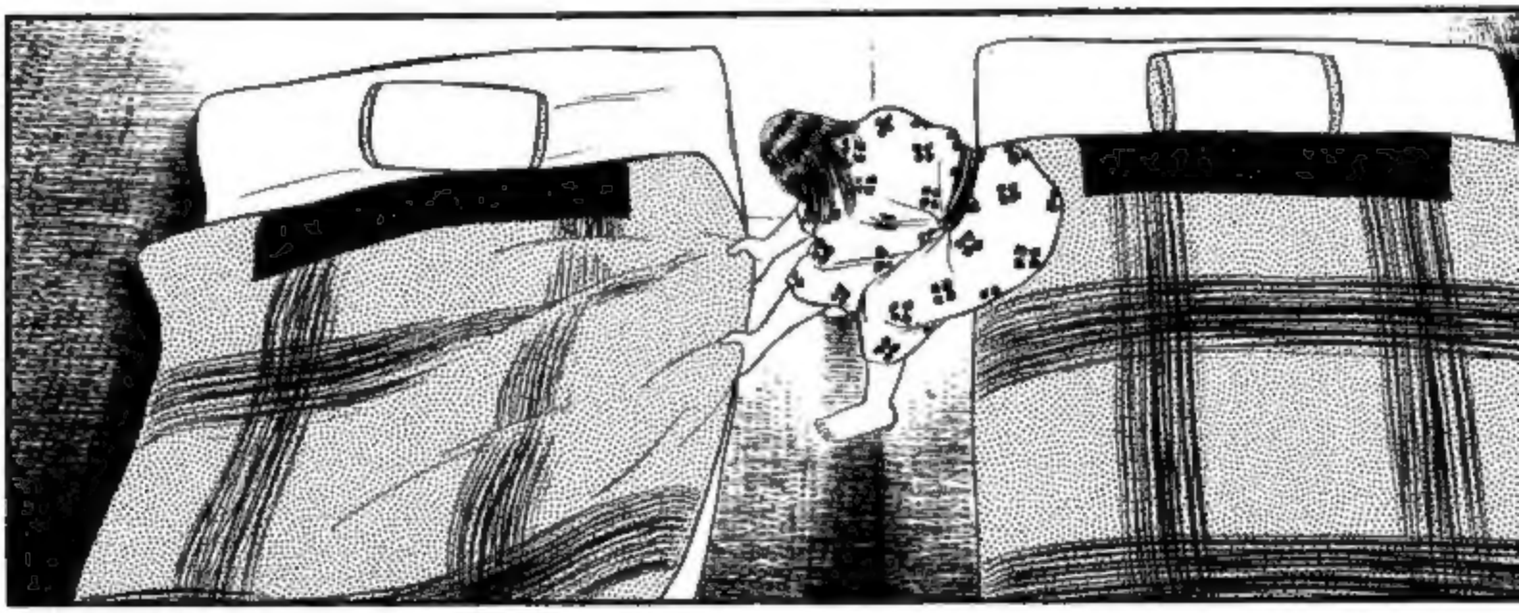
EH!?
EH!?...THEN... KAGARI-DONO AND HATSUNE-SAN...DO THAT...TOGETHER...!?
.....

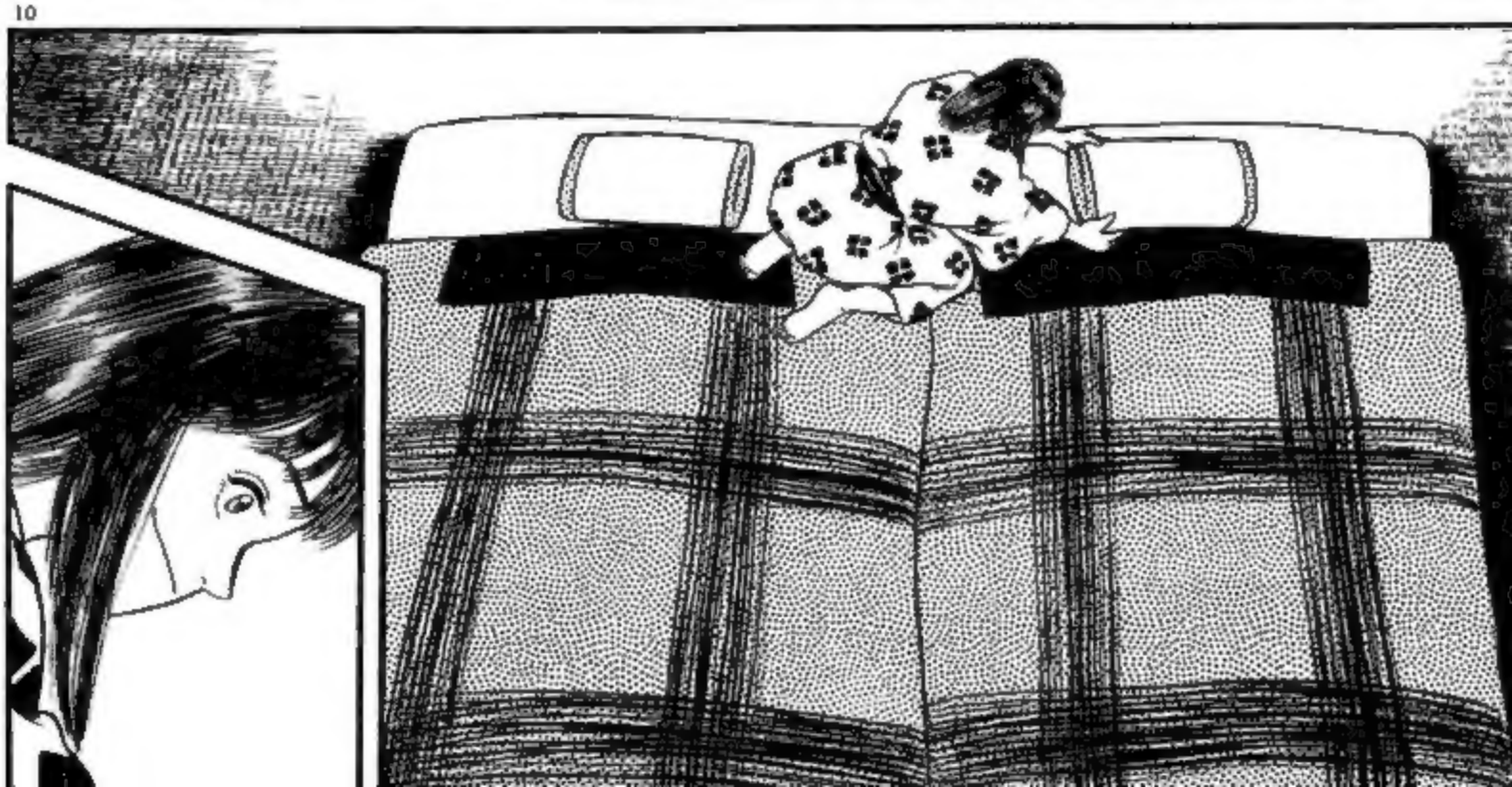

YES!
!!.....
LET'S GET ALONG FROM HERE ON IN!
THE SKILLS WE WERE TAUGHT ARE DIFFERENT, BUT WE HAD A SIMILAR UPBRINGING

I'VE RECOGNIZED YOUR SKILLS! HELL, KAGARI HAS TOO!
AT FIRST, SINCE YOU'RE YOUNGER THAN US AND WERE SPECIFICALLY CHOSEN BY THE EMINENT TENKAI-SAMA...WE WERE ALL JEALOUS. SORRY FOR HAVING BEING COLD TOWARD YOU.
IT'S TRUE!
BUT WE WERE FLOORED WHEN WE HEARD YOU TOOK OUT GENSAI, HIS MEN AND ALL THE RASETSUGARASU TOTALLY ON YOUR OWN!

HATSUNE-SAN, LET ME WASH YOUR BACK!
AZUMI-CHAN, YOU GO ON AND SLEEP.
OH!? AND YOU, HATSUNE-SAN?
I JUST NEED TO CHAT WITH KAGARI FOR A BIT.







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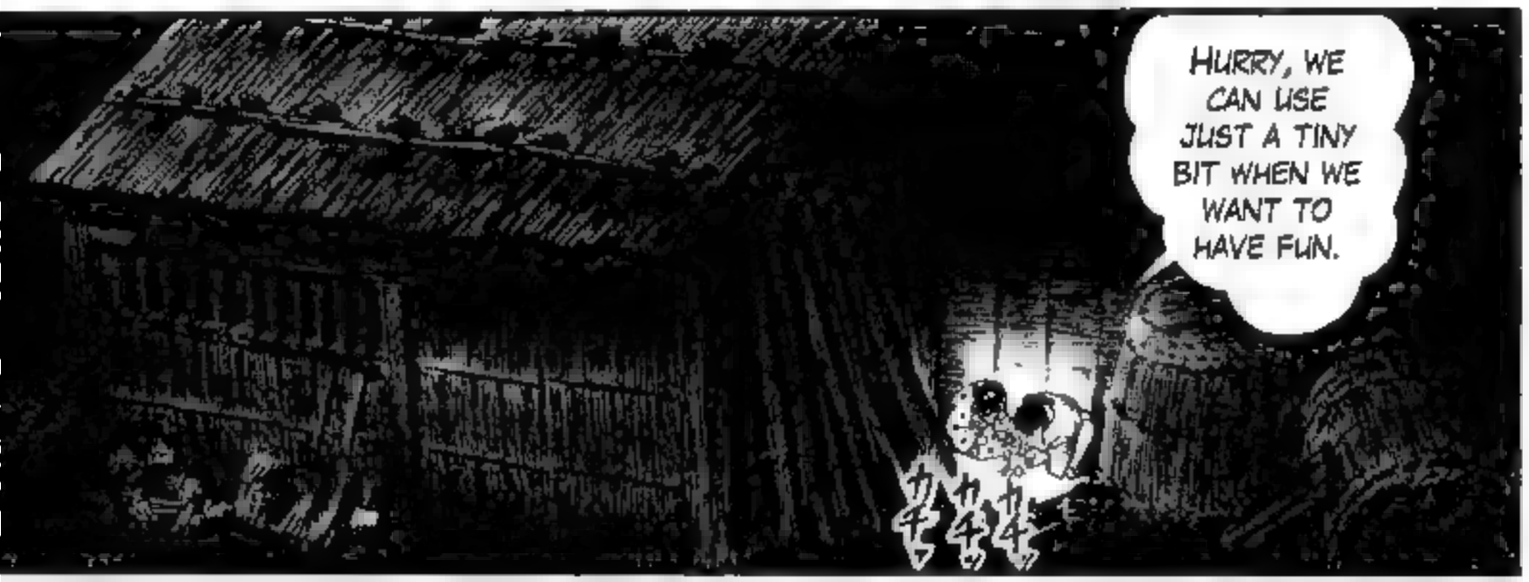

HURRY, WE CAN USE JUST A TINY BIT WHEN WE WANT TO HAVE FUN.

AHHHH... THAT'S THE STUFF...

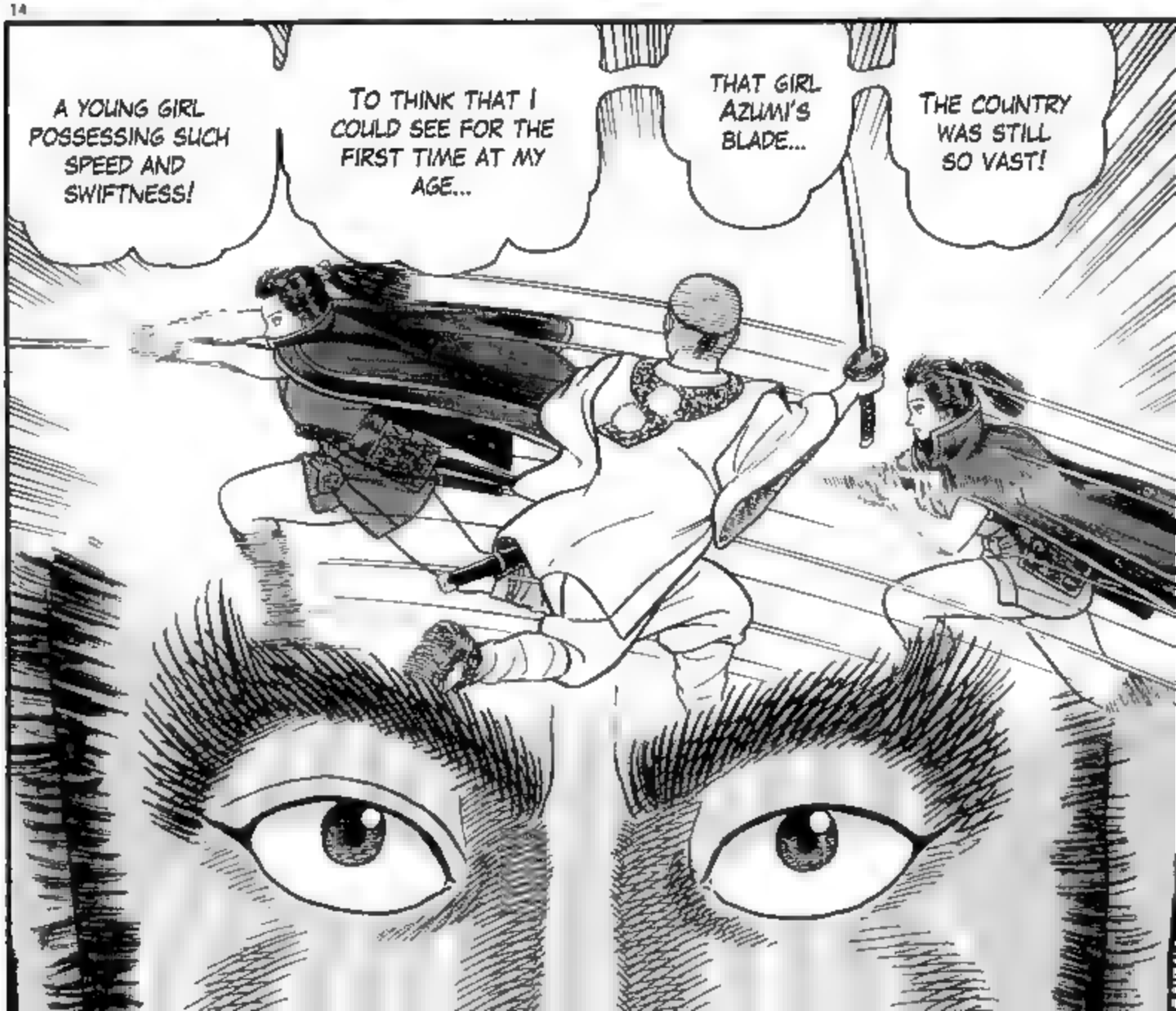
I KNOW.
SHUNJIRŌ'S NOT AROUND ANY MORE...HE CAN'T MAKE ANY NEW...

ABOUT THE TEMPLE WE'VE JUST PASSED... HE SAID THAT DATE MASAMUNE IS CONNECTED TO IT OR SOMETHING.. BUT IS IT TRUE!?
HOW CAN HYŌSUKE KNOW ABOUT IT IF IT'S HIS FIRST TIME IN THESE LANDS?

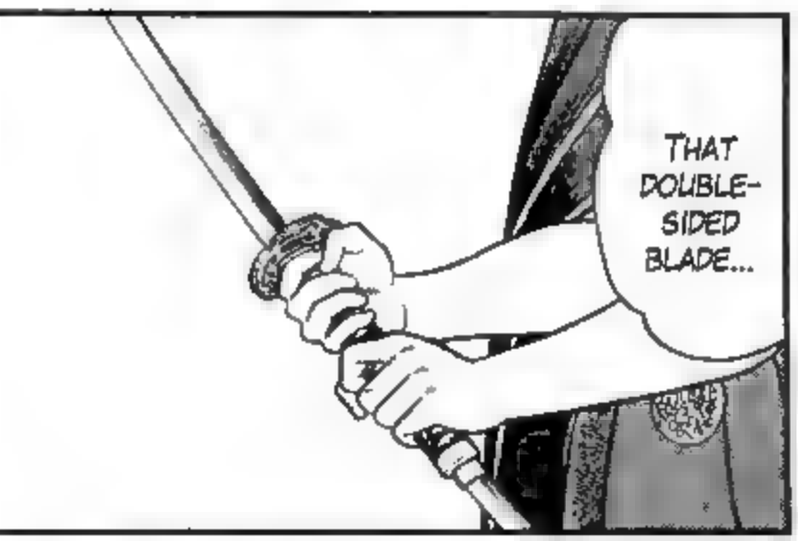
LET'S TRUST HIM!
HOW CAN WE ACT ON ANYTHING IN THIS IF WE DON'T BELIEVE IN HYŌSUKE-DONO?

WELL...WE CAN'T HELP BUT TRUST HIM.
WE SHOULD ASSUME THE OTHER TARGETS WILL LODGE NEAR HERE AS WELL.
SO, IF DATE MASAMUNE WILL PROBABLY COME TO THAT TEMPLE...

HOW IMMATURE! HOW IMMATURE YOU ARE, MUSASHI!
YOU THOUGHT TO...HAVE TAKEN YOUR SWORD TO A PEERLESS LEVEL... YOU BRAGGED TO HAVE SEEN THROUGH ALL OF THE SWORDS IN THE COUNTRY...

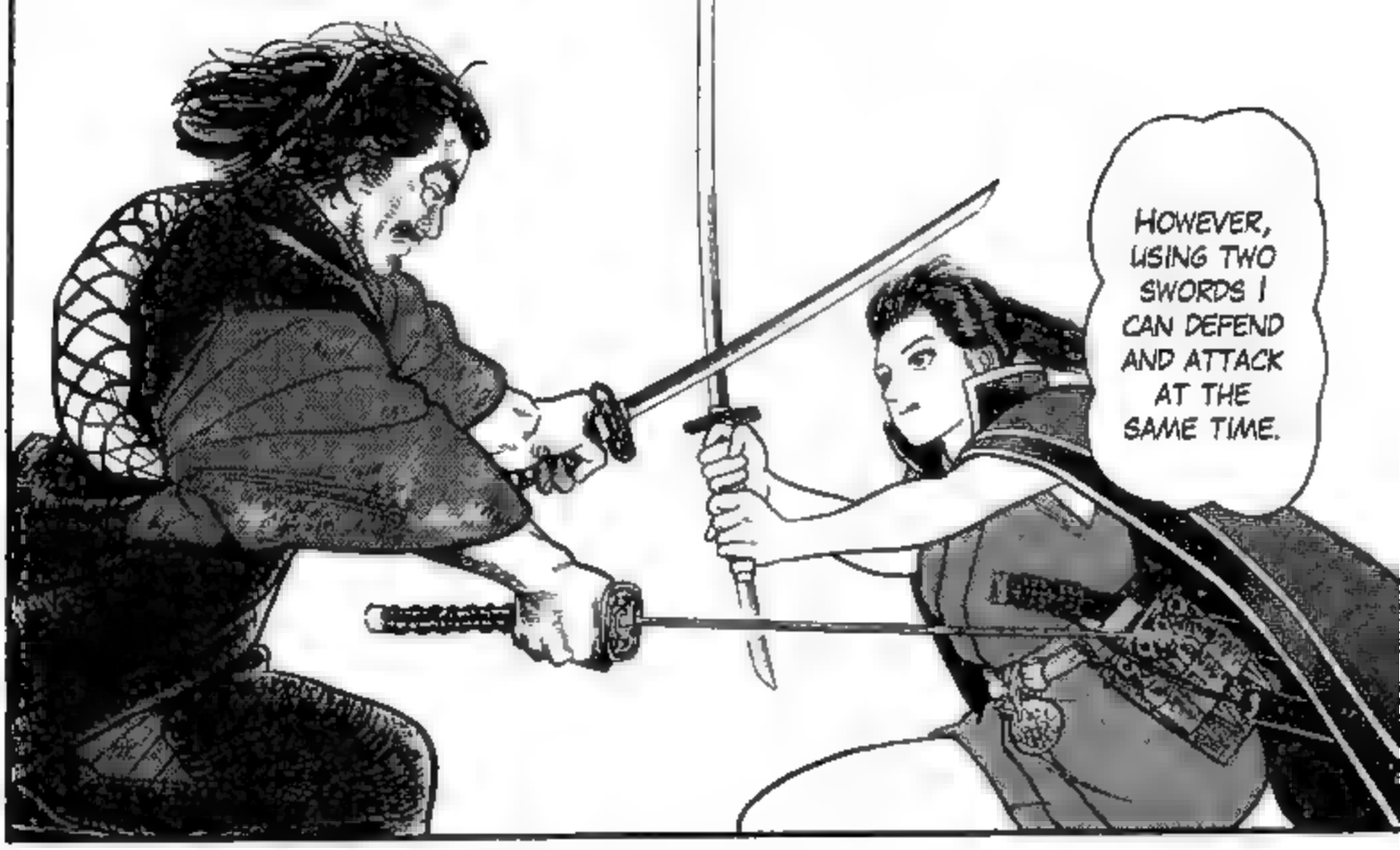

A YOUNG GIRL POSSESSING SUCH SPEED AND SWIFTNESS!
TO THINK THAT I COULD SEE FOR THE FIRST TIME AT MY AGE...
THAT GIRL AZUMI'S BLADE...
THE COUNTRY WAS STILL SO VAST!

IF WE WERE TO FIGHT... WOULD I WIN?

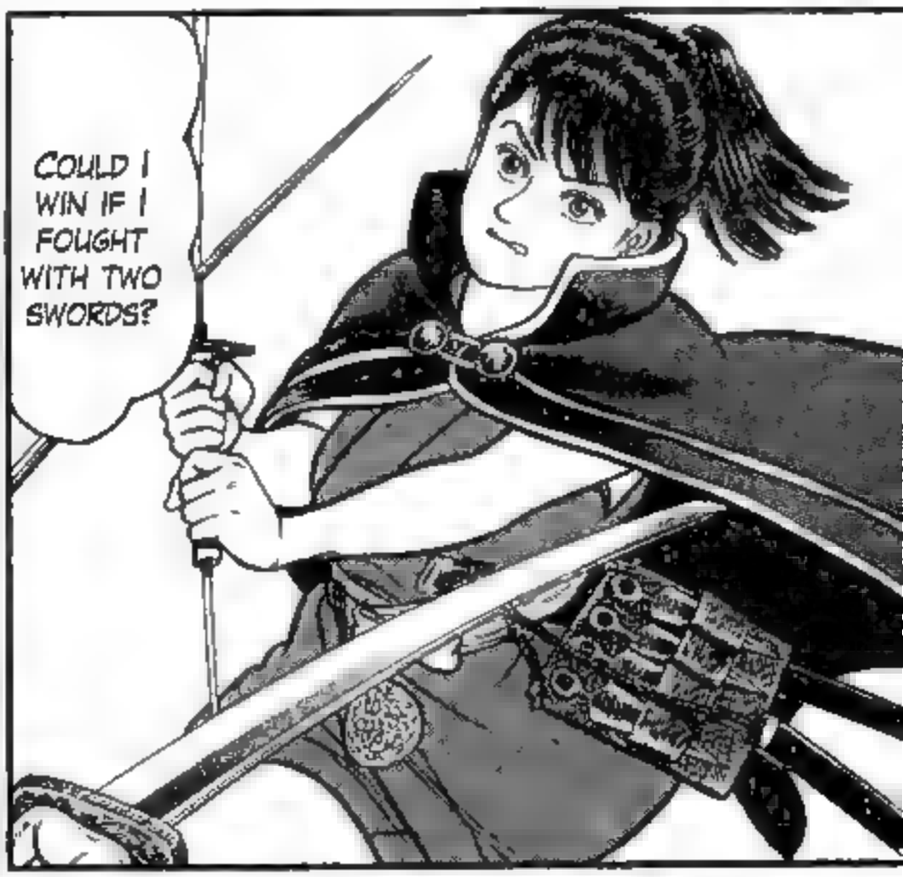

THAT DOUBLE-SIDED BLADE...

WHAT STANCE WOULD SHE ASSUME?

SHE'D TAKE THE ADVANTAGE AND STRIKE WITH EVEN MORE SPEED!
AFTER PARR-YING...


HOWEVER, USING TWO SWORDS I CAN DEFEND AND ATTACK AT THE SAME TIME.

AZUMI COULD DECIDE NOT TO BOTHER DEFENDING AND JUST STRIKE AT ME.
WAIT.

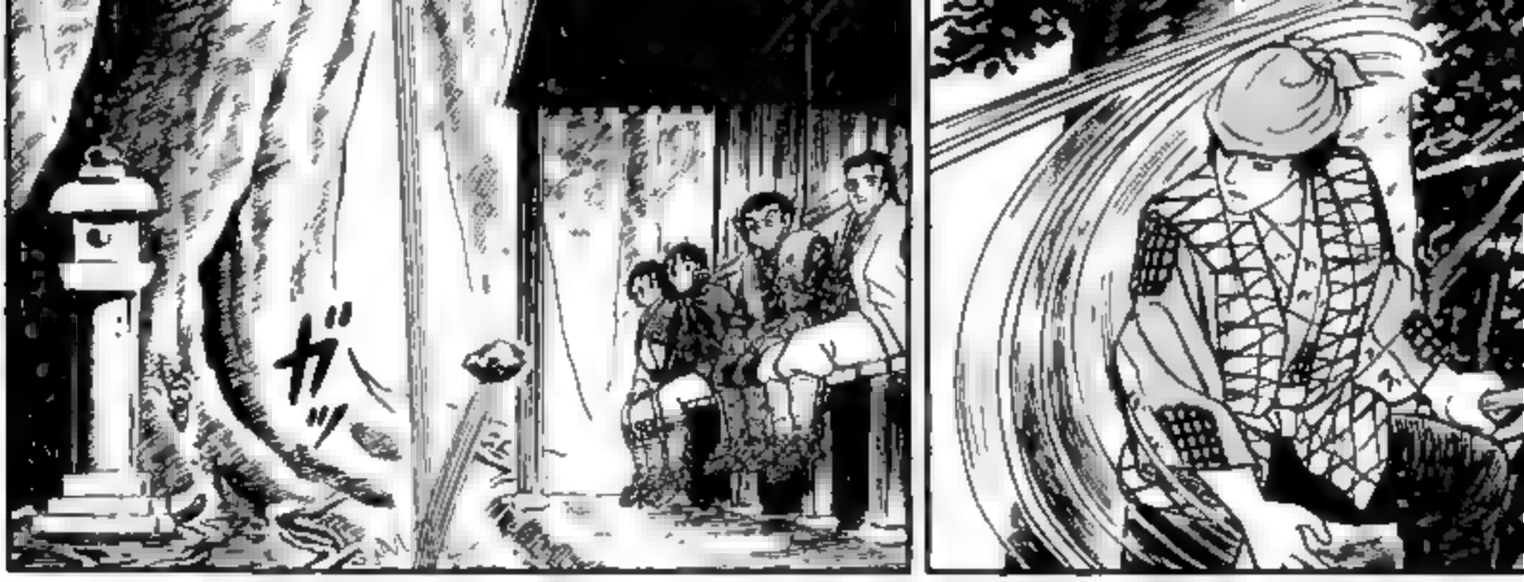

COULD I WIN IF I FOUGHT WITH TWO SWORDS?

WITHOUT DEFENDING, SHE WOULD DASH TOWARD ME AT AN UNBELIEVABLE SPEED...
.....

...JUST LIKE...IF SHE WERE A FENCER WHO COULD LEAP LIKE A BEAST!!
COULD SHE... DEFEAT EVEN THE SWORD OF MUSASHI?

I CANNOT SIMPLY OVERLOOK AZUMI AND DO NOTHING!
TO REACH THE HEIGHTS I AIM FOR,

MORE THAN THAT, I MUST!
I WANT TO TRY!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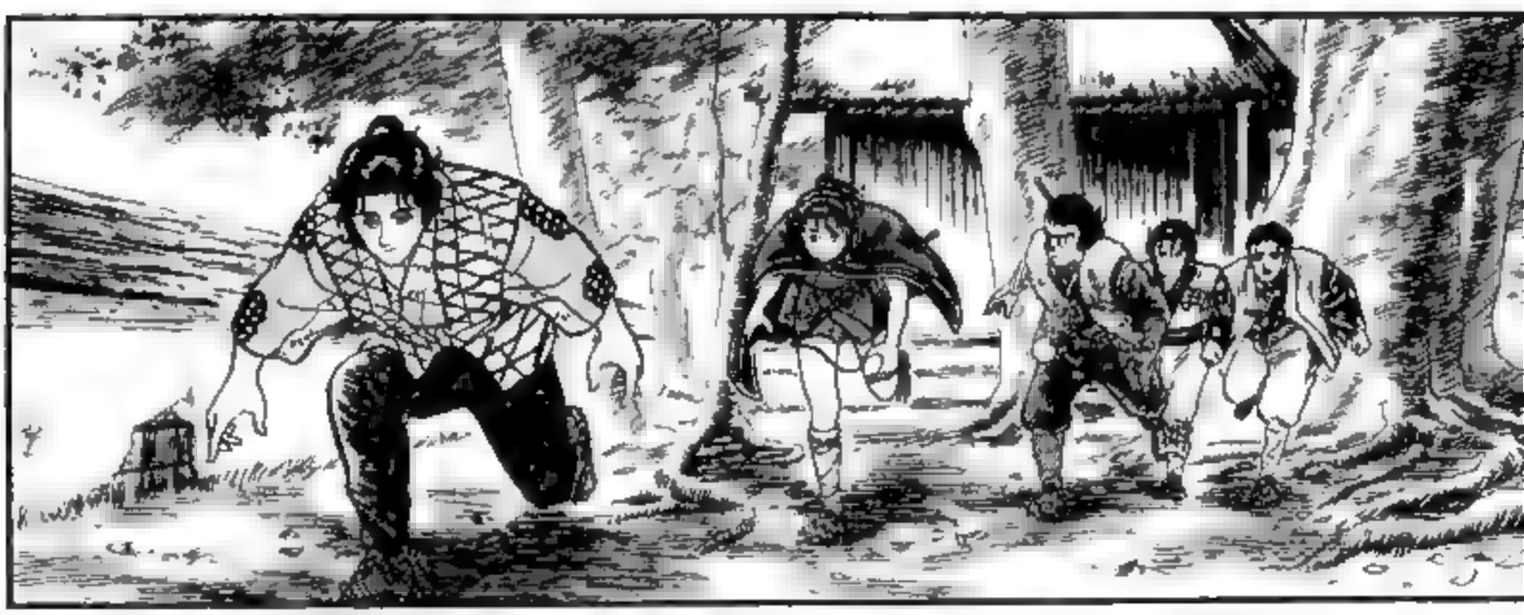
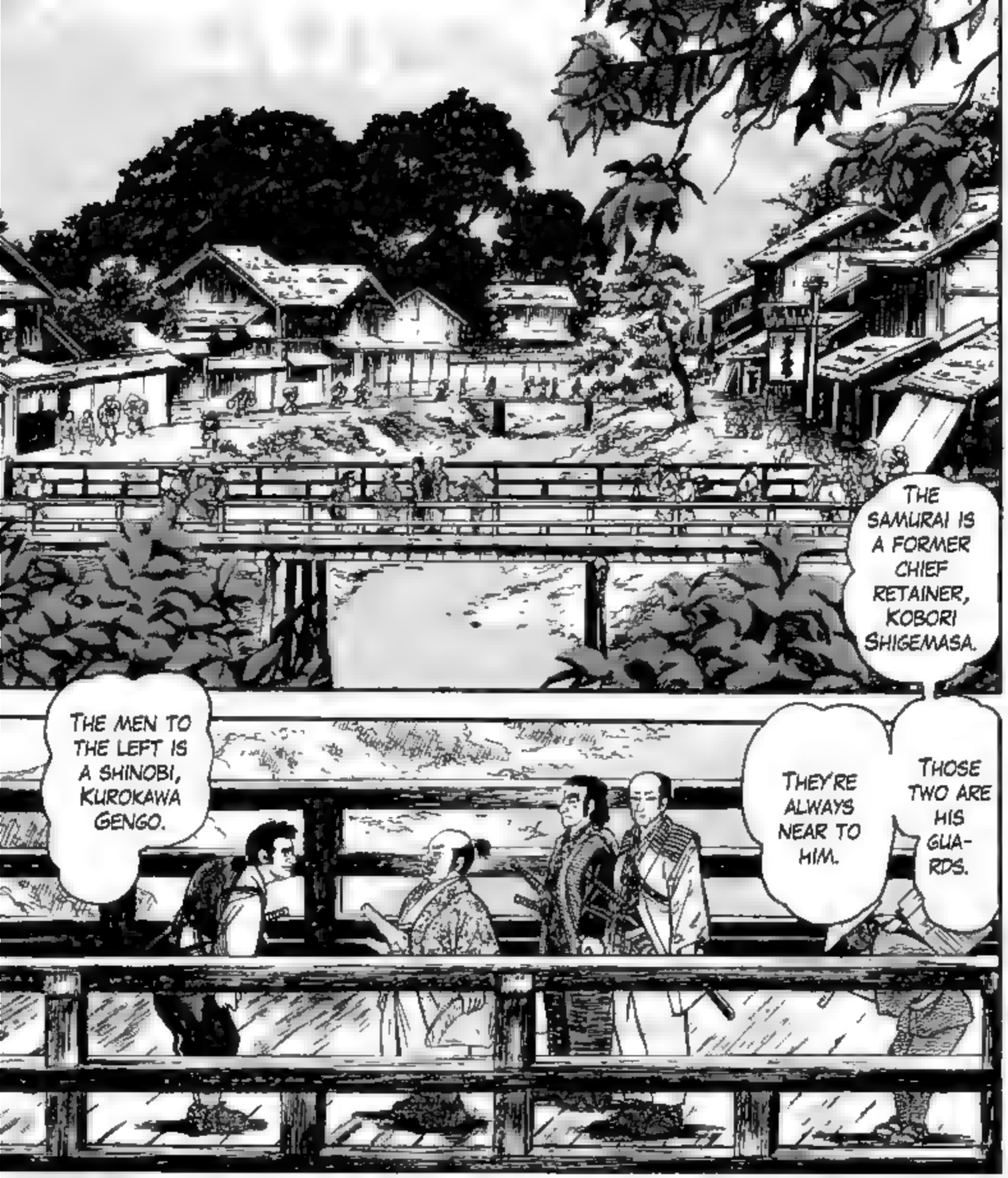
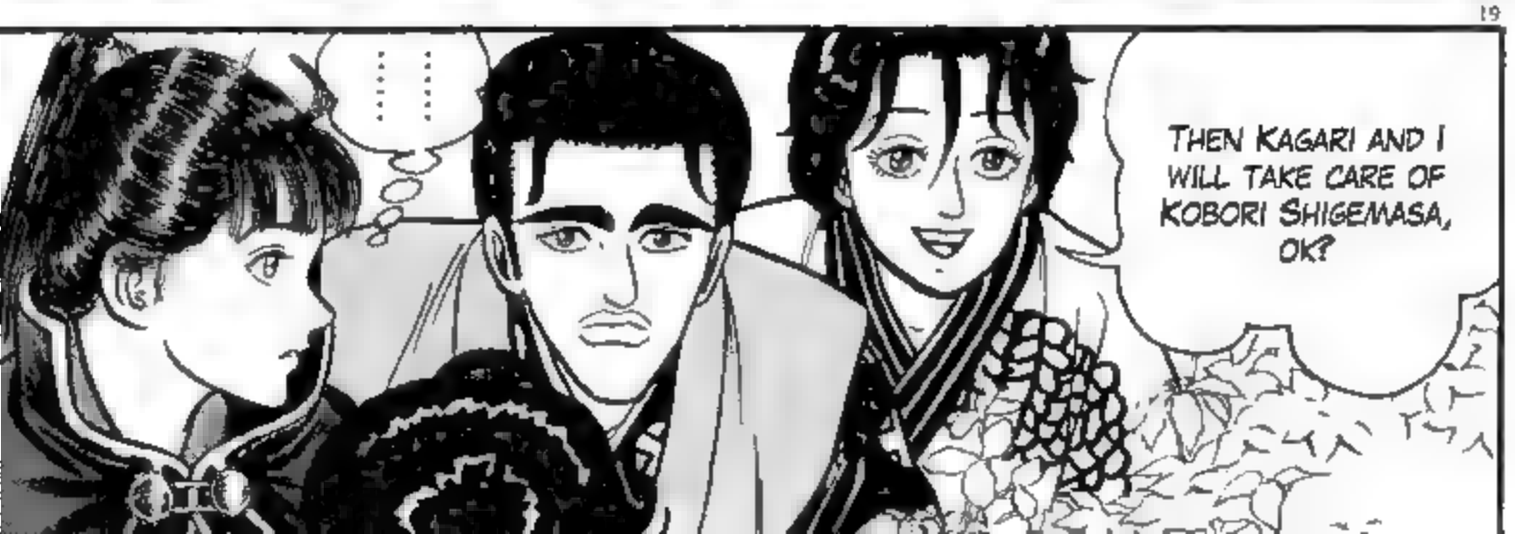
SEEMS HE'S SPOTTED SOMEONE!



IT SEEMS THEY DIDN'T RECEIVE INFORMATION THAT THEY'RE BEING TARGETED.
THOSE TWO...TALKING IN FRONT OF EACH OTHER ON THE BRIDGE...


THE SAMURAI IS A FORMER CHIEF RETAINER, KOBORI SHIGEMASA.
THE MEN TO THE LEFT IS A SHINOBI, KUROKAWA GENGO.
THEY'RE ALWAYS NEAR TO HIM.
THOSE TWO ARE HIS GUA-RDS.


.....
THEN KAGARI AND I WILL TAKE CARE OF KOBORI SHIGEMASA, OK?

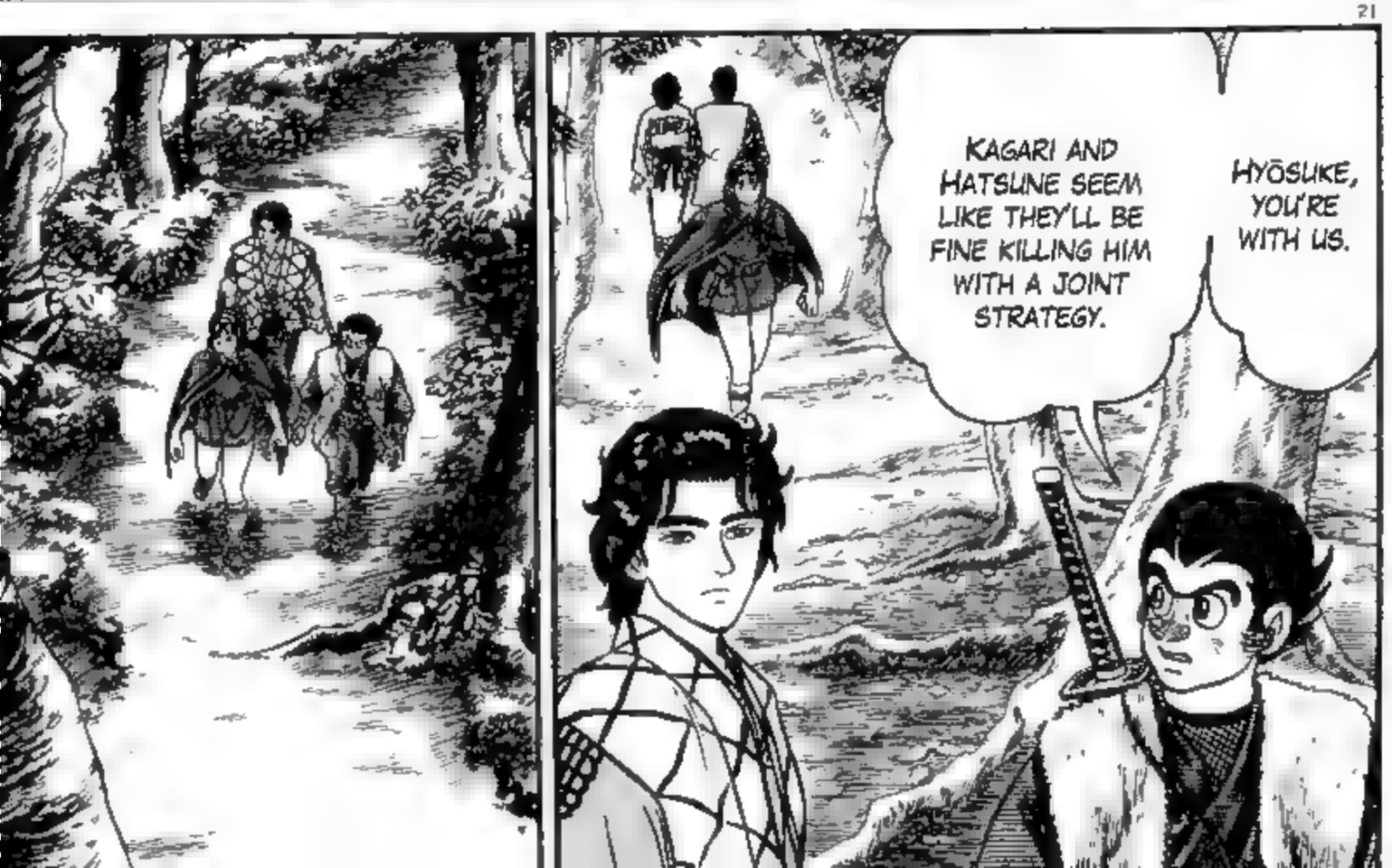
OH, THEY'RE SPLITTING UP!

.....
RIGHT!
THEN WE'LL BE SPLITTING UP AS WELL, EH?

LET'S MEET AT THE INN!

UM ...
BE REALLY CAREFUL WITH THOSE TWO BODYGUARDS!!...AND... AND THEN...

.....
DON'T WORRY! I WON'T BE HASTY.
MY SKILLS TAKE SOME TIME TO PUT INTO USE AFTER ALL!


KAGARI AND HATSUNE SEEM LIKE THEY'LL BE FINE KILLING HIM WITH A JOINT STRATEGY.
HYŌSUKE, YOU'RE WITH US.

THAT'S THE PLAN.
INTEND TO KILL HIM RIGHT AWAY?

TRUE.

IF WE LET HIM GO FOR A LITTLE, HE COULD MEET WITH OTHER TARGETS, YOU KNOW.

WHAT HAPP-ENED?
UMM...HE STOPPED! HE'S NOT MOVING!

AND NOW HE'S WALKING SLOWLY...
THERE HE IS!

ANOTHER TARGET?

THAT DECREPIT OLD MAN!?

THAT OLD MAN...HE'S IKEDA TŌNAI. ANOTHER SHINOBI.

.....
.....

HE'S IN DISGUISE.

THE FACT HE DISGUISED AT THAT LEVEL MEANS THAT HE ALREADY KNEW THAT HE WAS TARGETED...
SHALL WE EACH DEAL WITH ONE, AZUMI?
TWO OF THEM NOW.

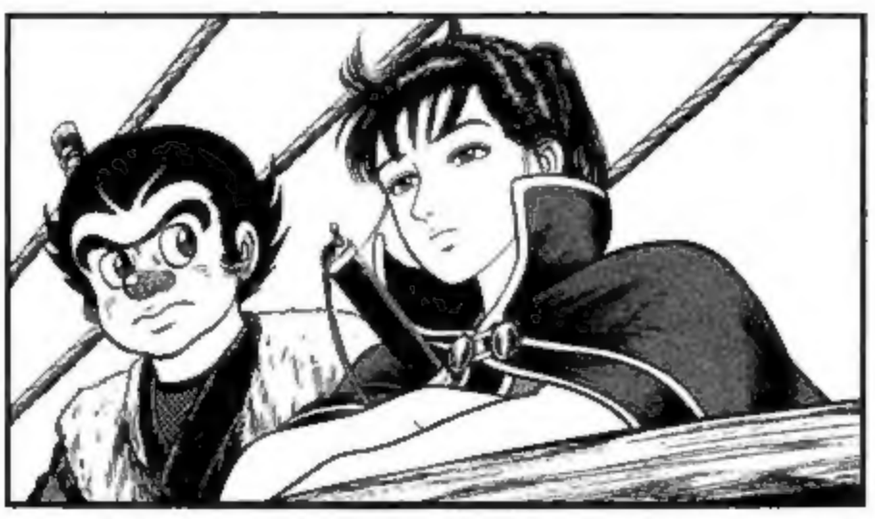
HE'S NOW TELLING KUROKAWA GENGO THAT AND TO PAY ATTENTION. I'M SURE OF IT...
...RIGHT....

HOW'RE YOU GONNA APPROACH HIM?
.....

HERE THEY COME.

OH, MY. SO WE WERE FOUND OUT!

THE FAMOUS AZUMI-SAN HERELF!
THAT YOUNG GIRL!
IT'S HER!



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